



DEC NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

State, UAF visit state fairs to test for avian influenza

Birds sampled at Tanana Valley Fair, more planned for Kenai, Palmer

August 18, 2005--University of Alaska Fairbanks scientists and the state veterinarian have joined forces at state agricultural fairs to test domestic animals for avian influenza, the Department of Environmental Conservation announced today.

Since 2003, highly pathogenic Avian Influenza (AI) H5N1 has become endemic in Southeast Asia with recent outbreaks among poultry in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The disease continues to spread, carried by wild waterfowl, which could potentially reach Alaska and Western Europe.

Animal health experts warn that efforts to control the spread of avian flu must focus on better management practices on farms and in open-air markets. There are no large commercial poultry operations in Alaska--most domestic poultry reside in small backyard flocks--but there are a few farms that raise as many as 400 to 500 birds. While surveillance of Alaska's domestic poultry population is difficult, one solution is to test at Alaska's agricultural fairs.

Approximately 150 birds were sampled at the Tanana Valley Fair in August, according to State Veterinarian Dr. Bob Gerlach. "We anticipate sampling more birds at the Kenai Peninsula Fair in Ninilchik today and the State Fair in Palmer August 25-September 5," he said. "The goal is to collect surveillance samples and distribute information about avian influenza and how to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in producers' flocks. Some prevention methods include: keeping poultry away from water sources that may have been contaminated by wild birds; providing clean clothing and disinfection facilities for employees; and thoroughly disinfecting equipment and vehicles entering and leaving the farm."

Avian influenza prevention should also include better management practices, such as using plastic instead of wooden crates for easier cleaning, as well as cleaning and disinfecting the marketplace after every day of sale, especially in small open-air farms where domestic poultry and waterfowl are allowed to intermingle with wild birds.

According to state and university officials, H5N1 has not been found in Alaska, but plans for nationwide surveillance to detect any introduction could be extremely valuable to public health and agriculture. Researchers will use the information gained from the state fair and wild bird sampling to learn more about the ecology and emergence of avian influenza strains, and to heighten awareness and evaluate the need for surveillance and management practices in domestic flocks and wild birds.

For more information on avian flu testing or prevention, please contact the State Veterinarian at 907-269-7635.

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